The Saylor Foundation's "The Mediterranean Trading System"

A truly global commercial world existed from the early sixteenth century onward, connecting the Americas with Africa, Europe, and Asia, and later integrating Oceania as well. Because of new ship technologies and the intercontinental nature of this commercial system, the great oceans of the world became the centers of long-distance trading networks that connected the Americas with Europe and sub-Saharan Africa across the Atlantic, Europe and Asia around the southern tip of Africa and into the Indian Ocean, and Asia and the Americas across the Pacific. This did not mean, however, that the old trade routes of the Mediterranean declined. In fact, despite increasing conflict among European, Asian, and African states, the Mediterranean was a vibrant trading zone for much of this period.

In the seventeenth century, the Ottoman Empire dominated much of the trade in the Mediterranean region, sometimes in connection with trading partners among Italian city-states like Venice and Genoa. This trade brought in the North African ports, which provided wheat, sugar, and sub-Saharan goods, and took in cloth and other European and Asian products. Most of these ports—such as Tunis and Algiers—were technically part of the Ottoman Empire. In the 1750s, especially, Ottoman control declined, partly due to the rise of Orthodox Islamic challengers on the Arabian Peninsula, and partly due to their declining economic position.

Another important North African state, Morocco, remained independent and played an important part in this trade. Ruled by the descendants of Muawlay Isma'il, Morocco managed to balance the needs of cosmopolitan trading elites in cities like Rabat and Tangier with the Sufi Islam of Berbers and the growing Orthodox Islamic Wahabbiyya sect.

In the nineteenth century, several European states came to dominate trade in the region. France, especially, became important as a consumer of foodstuffs and oils from Africa. French firms paid for many of these goods in cash. They largely traded with local North African merchant families, many of which were Jewish. These families in turn supported the governments of their states (or Ottoman provinces) and were often granted monopolies to participate in the trade.

As a result of this commerce, the Mediterranean was a very lively and deeply integrated zone. In addition to goods, people—migrants, merchants, and diplomats—moved back and forth as well. The port cities of the Ottoman Empire and Morocco had diverse populations and generally enjoyed good economic health, although periods of warfare and occasional outbreaks of disease sometimes hampered their development. Their eventual decline would come primarily as a result of military conquest, which began with the French invasion of Algeria in 1830. Unlike the Ottomans, the French were not willing to allow the Algerians to largely rule themselves on a day-to-day basis, but instead ruled the region very much as a colony.

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